

EPA's Comparative Risk Projects

Risk Communication and Public Participation



WHAT IS RISK COMMUNICATION?

The traditional definition of risk communication is: the transmission of information about health and environmental risks, their significance, and the policies aimed at managing them. Risk communication can be in the form of warning labels on consumer products or it can be in the form of dialogues among government officials, industry representatives, and the public on topics such as toxic waste, hazards in public buildings, and accidents involving release of hazardous substances into the environment.

Major risk communication goals for governmental and private sector entities include:

- taking responsibility for understanding risks and holding a dialogue about those risks with an audience so that the audience can make an informed decision about how to deal with the risk(s);
- promoting credibility and trust between the public, government, and industry officials about the nature and management of risks;
- making complex technical data and policy information more accessible and easily understood to a wide range of audiences; and
- providing information on risk to the media to reinforce accurate and unbiased reporting.

WHY INVOLVE THE PUBLIC

One of the measures of an effective comparative risk project is the extent to which the public is effectively engaged. There are a number of reasons for involving the public. First of all, project participants need to understand public values in order to rank environmental problems wisely. Second, projects need the commitment of established constituencies in order to bring about change. Third, projects need public involvement in order to build the capacity to make improved environmental decisions. And last, as Paul Templet, then of the Louisiana DEQ said, "it's their environment and their money."

THE ROLE OF RISK COMMUNICATION IN COMPARATIVE RISK PROJECTS

The ultimate reason for doing a comparative risk project is to bring about change: to change the way we do business; to make better environmental decisions; to achieve risk reduction/prevention. In order to accomplish this, it will require communication with and involvement of the public. Public participation is important because implementing project results may require individual behavior changes (testing for radon, driving cars less), different laws (such as the new air regulations in Washington state), in order to achieve the desired vision for the state/locality/tribe. This kind of change doesn't take place if the comparative risk study is an internal, bureaucratic intellectual exercise. Rather, it results from appropriate involvement of the public throughout the process:

- identifying where we are now (through a risk analysis of environmental problem areas and a ranking of relative risks);
- determining where we want to be and how we will get there (defining goals and strategies for risk management); and
- knowing when we've achieved success (environmental indicators and other measures of success).

Risk communication is a tool for ensuring inclusiveness in the process -- it gives many different (including nontraditional) stakeholders a voice.

THE RISK COMMUNICATION PLAN

Taking the time to prepare a risk communication plan will, in the long run, save time, money, and help achieve the project goals. There are several specific resources available to help prepare a plan in detail from RSPD, GMI and WCED, but in general a good plan should address who, why, how and what. The "how and what" (i.e., the specific techniques such as newsletters, county fairs, roundtables, etc.) are dependent on carefully articulating the who and why.

WHO: There is no one "public," but rather multitudes of interest groups. Think about how you want to define "public" for the purposes of your project. Will you need broad public support, or are there specific groups for which you will need their support, buy-in, or participation?

WHY: Most projects start off by saying "we want to have public meetings." You first need to answer why. It is frequently a hard question to answer, but critical. Carefully defining the goals of the public outreach effort will help ensure that you accomplish those goals.

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SEVEN CARDINAL RULES

The following is reprinted from EPA's pamphlet on the "Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication." While not developed specifically with comparative risk projects in mind, the advice is particularly valuable given the emphasis on public participation within the comparative risk process.

1 ACCEPT AND INVOLVE THE PUBLIC AS A LEGITIMATE PARTNER

A basic tenet of risk communication in a democracy is that people and communities have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, their property, and the things they value.

Guidelines: Demonstrate your respect for the public and underscore the sincerity of your effort by involving the community early, before important decisions are made. Involve all parties that have an interest or a stake in the issue under consideration. If you are a government employee, remember that you work for the public. If you do not work for the government, the public still holds you accountable.

Points to Consider: • The goal of risk communication in a democracy should be to produce an informed public that is involved, interested, reasonable, thoughtful, solution-oriented, and collaborative; it should not be to diffuse public concerns or replace action.

2 PLAN CAREFULLY AND EVALUATE YOUR EFFORTS

Risk communication will be successful only if carefully planned. *Guidelines:* Begin with clear, explicit risk communication objectives --such as providing information to the public, motivating individuals to act, stimulating response to emergencies, or contributing to the resolution of conflict. Evaluate the information you have about the risk and know its strengths and weaknesses. Classify and segment the various groups in your audience. Aim your communications at specific subgroups in your audience. Recruit spokespeople who are good at presentation and interaction. Train your staff -- including technical staff--in communication skills; reward outstanding performance. Whenever possible, pretest your messages. Carefully evaluate your efforts and learn from your mistakes.

Points to Consider: • There is no such entity as "the public"; instead, there are many publics, each with its own interests, needs, concerns, priorities, preferences, and organizations.

• Different risk communication goals, audiences, and media require different risk communication strategies.

3 LISTEN TO THE PUBLIC'S SPECIFIC CONCERNS

If you do not listen to people, you cannot expect them to listen to you. Communication is a two-way activity.

Guidelines: Do not make assumptions about what people know, think, or want done about risks. Take the time to find out what people are thinking: use techniques such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Let all parties that have an interest or a stake in the issue be heard. Identify with your audience and try to put yourself in their place. Recognize people's emotions. Let people know that you understand what they said, addressing their concerns as well as yours. Recognize the "hidden agenda," symbolic meanings, and broader economic or political considerations that often underlie and complicate the task of risk communication.

Points to Consider: • People in the community are often more concerned about such issues as trust, credibility, competence, control, voluntariness, fairness, caring, and compassion than about mortality statistics and the details of quantitative risk assessment.

4 BE HONEST, FRANK AND OPEN

In communicating risk information, trust and credibility are your most precious assets.

Guidelines: State your credentials; but do not ask or expect to be trusted by the public. If you do not know an answer or are uncertain, say so. Get back to people with answers. Admit mistakes. Disclose risk information as soon as possible (emphasizing any reservations about reliability). Do not minimize or exaggerate the level of risk. Speculate only with great caution. If in doubt, lean toward sharing more information, not less--or people may think you are hiding something. Discuss data uncertainties, strengths and weaknesses--including the ones identified by other credible sources. Identify worst-case estimates as such, and cite ranges of risk estimates when appropriate.

Point to Consider: • Trust and credibility are difficult to obtain. Once lost they are almost impossible to regain completely.

5 COORDINATE AND COLLABORATE WITH OTHER CREDIBLE SOURCES

Allies can be effective in helping you communicate risk information.

Guidelines: Take time to coordinate all inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications. Devote effort and resources to the slow, hard work of building bridges with other organizations. Use credible and authoritative intermediaries. Consult with others to determine who is best able to answer questions about risk. Try to issue communications jointly with other trustworthy sources (for example, credible university scientists, physicians, or trusted local officials).

Points to Consider: • Few things make risk communication more difficult than conflicts or public disagreements with other credible sources.

6 MEET THE NEEDS OF THE MEDIA

The media are a prime transmitter of information on risk; they play a critical role in setting agendas and in determining outcomes.

Guidelines: Be open with and accessible to reporters. Respect their deadlines. Provide risk information tailored to the needs of each type of media (for example, graphics and other visual aids for television). Prepare in advance and provide background material on complex risk issues. Do not hesitate to follow up on stories with praise or criticism, as warranted. Try to establish long-term relationships of trust with specific editors and reporters.

Points to Consider: • The media are frequently more interested in politics than in risk; more interested in simplicity than in complexity; more interested in danger than in safety.

7 SPEAK CLEARLY AND WITH COMPASSION

Technical language and jargon are useful as professional shorthand. But they are barriers to successful communication with the public.

Guidelines: Use simple, nontechnical language. Be sensitive to local norms, such as speech and dress. Use vivid, concrete images that communicate on a personal level. Use examples and anecdotes that make technical risk data come alive. Avoid distant, abstract, unfeeling language about deaths, injuries, and illnesses. Acknowledge and respond (both in words and with actions) to emotions that people express--anxiety, fear, anger, outrage, helplessness. Acknowledge and respond to the distinctions that the public views as important in evaluating risks, e.g., voluntariness, controllability, familiarity, dread, origin (natural or man-made), benefits, fairness, and catastrophic potential. Use risk comparisons to help put risks in perspective; but avoid comparisons that ignore distinctions that people consider important. Always try to include a discussion of actions that are under way or can be taken. Tell people what you cannot do. Promise only what you can do, and be sure to do what you promise.

Points to Consider: • Regardless of how well you communicate risk information, some people will not be satisfied.

• Never let your efforts to inform people about risks prevent you from acknowledging--and saying--that any illness, injury, or death is a tragedy.

• If people are sufficiently motivated, they are quite capable of understanding complex risk information, even if they may not agree with you.